

## **Public Libraries are Wild and Wonderful**

### **Reflections on a challenging book – Brian Raitz**

I am writing this mostly to myself, but also to collect my thoughts and feelings about what transpired at the Library Board meeting last night. It was an incredibly challenging evening for anyone in that room. Passions were raised, emotions grew high, and the basic core standings of a Public Library was at the center of this controversy.

To begin with, several people came to the Board meeting upset about a certain book (Gender Queer). I was unaware of the real motive at first but knew something had obviously brought them in interest to the Library. They asked about the Library, funding, and management. I went over a brief history of the Library and its funding resources. It was later that we heard that a certain book was at the heart of the visit.

The book in question is a graphical autobiography of someone's life growing up with gender identification issues. The issue with this book is a couple frames (comic jargon) with graphic portrayal of a sexual nature that offended those in the room. It offended most but not all, and this may be the heart of the issue.

Libraries are not safe repositories of a vanilla past or present that is inoffensive to everyone. Public Libraries are dangerous, wild, and wonderful places to explore the world and our community together through the past, the present, and the future. The past is there in older materials in the collection, that sometimes become less relevant or give us a window into who we were (genealogy and local history). Public Libraries are also a reflection of the interests of everyone in the community now, and a glimpse of where those interests are going. Anyone that spends time in a Public Library will soon run into materials and people that challenge, disturb, and offend them. We are a broad spectrum of people in our community, and to meet the needs and desires of everyone, this dangerous and disturbing part of Public Libraries is inevitable.

I am not upset with the individuals that came in passionate protest to the Library Board meeting. I actually have quite a bit of empathy for them and their feelings. I have those same feelings regularly about materials that I see and help purchase for the Library, but I have also come to realize that the Public Library is not a reflection of only my interests or those that agree with me. It is here for everyone in the community equally. I need to provide that service equally to each and everyone in the community, and that is when problems arise.

I challenge everyone to look around you at the world. Do you agree with everything there? Are you in the majority on this subject? Are you in the minority on any subjects? Do not all of those interests need to be reflected in our Public Library? For that is what we are at the core. The Public Library reflects the entire community in all its various beliefs. It is a place where we can come to explore those interests that we may share with the many or the few, and be treated with respect.

I know this is hard to swallow for many that do not work in this setting (and even those that do), because the Library is such a personal place. We think it reflects us, and I hope it does. The problem is that it also reflects others in the community that we do not agree with in various ways. For the Library to be Yours it also needs to be Theirs. That is easy intellectually to understand, but in daily life it is exceedingly difficult to come to grips with personally.

I wish the best to all of you that take this journey. It is challenging, but I also think that it is the core of what we are as a Free Society and as a Public Library serving our community.